

# International Women's Day: Minding your Mental Health

**Every day is an opportunity to celebrate and cheer on the women around us, highlighting their achievements and recognising their hardships.** If we stop to think about some of the fantastic women we are surrounded by each day, we may feel gratitude for them, thankful for their friendship and comradery, we may feel appreciative of their support and encouragements and, inspired by their behaviours and actions. Today, March 8th is International Women's Day, where we get the opportunity to do this on a greater level, celebrating women globally.

Each day, women's rights are being advocated for across the world to strive for continued gender inclusion and equality, yet despite this incredible movement, when it comes to women's mental health, continuing to raise this awareness is increasingly important. Mental Health is not selective of gender and is a continuing epidemic in our world today. In saying that, this International Women's Day, we want to shed a light on those experiences that women in particular face throughout their life cycle, that do in fact contribute to lower levels of mental health, such as: hormonal changes, menstruation, menopause, perinatal and post-natal experiences.



### Did you Know?

1. **One in five women** have been diagnosed with a mental disorder.
2. Menopause and hormonal changes experienced by women can directly and indirectly affect a woman's mental health and wellbeing.
3. **Over a quarter (26%) of young women aged between 16-24 years old** report having a common mental health problem in any given week. And this number is increasing.
4. While maternal mental health can affect women of all backgrounds, those who are of racial-ethnic minorities or have low socioeconomic status are at greater risk; they are also less likely to have access to quality care.
5. **10% of pregnant women globally and 15% of women who have just given birth** will experience poor mental health.
6. PCOS is associated with worse symptoms of depression, anxiety, OCD, and somatisation.
7. **Endometriosis which affects roughly 10% of women globally** has been shown to be associated with a decrease in quality of life.



**We've put together a list of 5 strategies that can support you in minding your mental health. Take a look below.**

**Mind-Body Connection:** We now understand that the mind and body are linked, and unmanaged stress can seriously impact our health. What we are holding in the mind, can often begin to present itself through the body. That's where movement can come in! Physical activity can counteract our stress response by reducing stress hormones circulating in the body and releasing endorphins. These "feel good" chemicals can improve our mood. Something as simple as going for a walk, attending a yoga class, or dancing around the kitchen to a good song. Anything that gets you moving, counts! So, let's be intentional with our movement.

**Task:** What are some ways you can incorporate movement and mindfulness this week? Start with 20 minutes. Get curious - try out different activities until you find one that works for you, and don't forget to make it fun!

**Social Connectedness:** Social connection improves physical, mental, and emotional well-being. People who feel more connected to others have been found to have lower levels of anxiety and depression and increased levels of empathy and self-esteem. Social connectedness is not about quantity, but rather the quality of the connections in our lives. Loneliness is on the rise and nowadays with remote and hybrid working, and our jam-packed schedules, our social connectedness can begin to suffer. The Healthy Ireland Survey 2023 showed that 8% of women aged 15-24 are most likely to say they often or always feel lonely. Making space in your week for these social connections is key to a healthy, balanced life. This can be anything from phoning a friend or family member for a chat, going for an evening walk with a neighbour, to joining a new social club. Treat your social skills like you would a muscle that requires exercising.

**Task:** Make a list of how you might be able to enhance the social connectedness in your life. Then pick one way to achieve this each week. Start small and build up!

**Nutrition:** We all know the importance of a good balanced diet. We see this everywhere: more protein, drink plenty of water, plan, limit caffeine and so on and so forth, but are we implementing this? Put simply, what you eat directly affects the structure and function of your brain and, ultimately, your mood. If making small, healthy changes in your diet can have a positive impact on your mental health then putting nutrition to the forefront of your daily life sounds good to me!

**Task:** Keep a food diary and get creative by trying new recipes!

**Sleep:** Sleep is more important than we probably give it credit for. When we sleep, the brain reorganises and recharges itself, and removes toxic waste byproducts which have accumulated throughout the day. Sleep deprivation has a vast impact on behaviour, mood, and cognitive performance. Having a wind down routine before bed, away from screens, can allow our brain to rest.

**Task:** A simple meditation, getting active during the day, or creating a peaceful sleep environment, are all just little tips that can help. Take a look at your current routine, how might you improve this? Note: If poor sleep persists, keep a sleep diary, and contact your doctor or a sleep expert to discuss further.



**Reaching Out:** The ultimate step to minding your mental health. Whether to a trusted friend or family member, reaching out for support is crucial. Starting that conversation may feel daunting at first but can be extremely powerful. Stigma was reported as the largest barrier to women seeking mental health support, with research showing that women often avoid this due to fear of being judged by others, with some even claiming it might portray them as looking like a “bad mother”. Let’s continue to pave the way for mental health support seeking in women by challenging this old way of thinking, challenging these stigmas, not only for ourselves and for our generation, but for the generations to come. There is no shame, only strength in reaching out and opening up.

**Task:** Ask yourself, is there someone I can trust to connect with today, to support me through how I’m feeling?

**If you feel you are often overwhelmed, anxious or have symptoms of depression, I encourage you to take the step to seek help via a psychologist your GP, or your EAP service today. Let’s continue to break barriers, support each other and mind our mental health.**

